At The End of the World, or the Last Thing I See
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Gale "Buck" Cleven/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Curtis Biddick/John Clarence "Bucky" Egan

Characters:
John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Gale "Buck" Cleven, Curtis Biddick, Harry Crosby, Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal, John Brady (Masters of the Air), Frank D. Murphy (1921-2007), Charles "Crank" Cruikshank, Howard "Hambone" Hamilton, Marjorie "Marge" Spencer, Everett Ernest Blakely

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Period Typical Attitudes, World War II, Angst, Mutual Pining, Implied Sexual Content, john is briefly with a woman, Combat Fatigue, john's mum is lovely, homoerotic wound cleaning, Grief/Mourning, Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Letters, homoerotic fighting, Guilt, Depression

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Part 1 of I, too, saw God through mud

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At The End of the World, or the Last Thing I See

by Razor_to_the_rosary

Summary

"How've you been tonight, Captain?" Curt said, fixing John with a look that made John a little weak in the knees, teasing emphasis on the last word. His eyes were almost grey in the streetlamp light.

"Excellent, Lieutenant." John replied with a grin, trying his best to match Curt's pace.

"Mm, good, see I thought you would be, since you've been eyeing up Cleven all night." Curt wrapped an arm around John to hold his waist.

"What?" John huffed through laughter, not sure whether he was truly incredulous or afraid.

"He's got a pretty face, I'll give y' that- but you're blindingly obvious if a guy knows what to look for."

or, John consistently yearning throughout the war.

Notes

Title from The Ghost Of You by My Chemical Romance

See the end of the work for more notes

6th November 1942

John placed the empty shot glass on the bar with a cringe, swallowing the mouthful of vodka right as Buck took his last sip of ginger beer.

"I think I ought to call it a night, Bucky." Gale said, leaning in closer to John's side to make sure he was heard.

"Yeah, me too-" John replied, standing from the table with a slight lurch, blinking away the slight dizziness. Gale stood too, hand going to John's lower back, picking up his own cap.

"Ey, I'll be joinin' ya lads." Curt was just as drunk as John, promting a little gaggle of men to stand and join them in leaving the bar. A few of them were on a weekend pass, the majority had just walked the few miles from the base to join them in the centre of Walla Walla.

Curt sidled up to John once they spilled onto the street, leaning into his side once he slung an arm around his shoulders, warm and solid. Gale walked ahead with Douglass, Crankshaft and DeMarco, giving John a great view as they talked about the last practise mission.

"How've you been tonight, Captain?" Curt said, fixing John with a *look* that made John a little weak in the knees, teasing emphasis on the last word. His eyes were almost grey in the streetlamp light.

"Excellent, Lieutenant." John replied with a grin, trying his best to match Curt's pace.

"Mm, good, see I thought you would be, since you've been eyeing up Cleven all night." Curt wrapped an arm around John to hold his waist.

"What?" John huffed through laughter, not sure whether he was truly incredulous or afraid.

"He's got a pretty face, I'll give y' that- but you're blindingly obvious if a guy knows what to look for."

"And you do?"

"I've been around, Jack, trust me."

"Stop with the fuckin-" John groaned quietly at the nickname, stopping himself before he could repeat that conversation,"Suppose I do just believe you, how do I stop being so obvious."

"I don't know, dude, you just look so in love every time you look at him."

"Can't exactly control that, can I?"

"Guess not. It'd be weird if you suddenly stopped lookin' at 'im."

"So your advice boils down to 'stop lookin". Great advice, so glad you decided to grace me with your presence." John laughed, squeezing Curt's shoulder.

"Yeah, I know. I'm full of knowledge."

"Hey, you're smarter than you look."

"Wha- hey!" Curt protested, reaching out to prod John in the side, setting both of them giggling.

Gale, Curt and John separated from the other guys before the turning to their hotel, those of them with leave staying the night in the city. Gale still walked ahead even though he now had no one to talk to, bidding them goodnight at the door.

John clung to Curt all the way up the three flights of stairs, only tripping once- which was pretty good for him- ending up outside John's room.

"Wanna smoke?" John asked as he fumbled with the key, inviting Curt in on an impulse. He didn't want to be alone yet.

"Sure."

John locked the door behind them and fished his pack of cigarettes and lighter from his pocket, allowing Curt to take one and lighting both. Curt gave him a rakish grin and flopped down on the threadbare armchair, crossing one leg over the other as he inhaled.
John sat on the bed, opposite Curt but a good metre away, shrugging off his jacket onto the floor.

"You been around, huh?"

"You really wanna know?" Curt gave him another *look*, eyes piercing in the low light, just the moon lighting half the room from the gap in the curtains.

"Why else would I be askin'? If you don't want to tell me that's fine-" John said, he didn't even know why he was asking, Curt was his

friend-

"No. Just curious why you even care. Interested in my wares, eh?"

"*Wares?* You're not a fuckin' antiques salesman." John laughed. He didn't deny Curt's question.

"No, no, I wouldn't make you pay. Unless you want to of course, I'll take a couple dollars off your hands-" Curt leant forward, grin turning almost smug.

"I'm not payin' for your fuckin' *wares*, dude." John located an ashtray and stubbed his ciggarette out, handing it to Curt as he took one last inhale.

"That's alright. You sure you can handle all this, darlin'?" Curt placed the ashtray on the table, other hand vaguely gesturing to himself.

"Why don't we find out, huh?" John challenged, watching Curt strip his jacket and start unbuttoning his shirt, slowly approaching the bed as he did it.

"You got a rubber?"

"Yeah, hold on." John went rummaging in his interior jacket pockets, pulling out everything he had with him- wallet, pro-kit, K-Y lube, military ID, cigarettes, lighter, a packet of condoms.

"You sure have a lot of shit in your pockets constantly. "

"Gotta be prepared if I'm going to be impulsive."

Curt pushed John's shoulders back so he sat up straighter, plonking himself in his lap and resting his knees either side of John's thighs. John looked up at him- only a few inches higher- and allowed Curt to start undoing the buttons on his shirt, pushing it off his shoulders once he was done.

"You're still awake?" Curt sat up in bed, squinting to see John where he sat on the windowsill, edges blurred in a haze of smoke.

"Woke up an hour ago." John replied, exhaling a lung full of smoke as he turned to Curt, the gap in the curtains letting in enough moonlight to see Curt's pale face. John had only put on his undershirt, now shivering slightly, he regretted not just staying in bed.

"Dreams of dying in a fiery explosion?"

"More, uh, somethin' that'd get me court martialled if I recreated it."

"On'a those, right."

Curt rubbed at his eyes, shifting to the end of the bed right as John stood up, blocking the light. Curt slapped a hand on John's waist to pull him in, gaze turning mischievous, John let himself be pulled and stopped just in front of Curt's knees. Curt took his cigarette and took a drag, other hand creeping down from John's waist, stroking over his hipbone, the taut muscles in his upper thigh.

"You wanna tell me about it? Swear I won't tell a soul, Bucky."

"Alright." John took his cigarette back and took one last inhale, leaning over to stub it out in the ashtray on the armchair, "It was Buck and I, always is, on leave just like us now. He touched me like he knew me, like he wanted me to feel his love through his hands."

"Real sweet, huh." Curt moved his legs again, duvet falling further off the edge, barely covering him. John didn't even try to pretend he wasn't looking.

"Yeah. He, uh, pressed my hand to his heartbeat, told me that as long as it was beating he would love me. Then I woke up."

"John Egan, hopeless romantic. Never would'a guessed." Curt smiled warmly, both hands now stroking down John's thighs, to his knees and back up. John didn't know if he was going to start something or just wanted to touch him.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"Get down 'ere." Curt muttered, suddenly pulling John down by the back of the neck to kiss him, pulling him back into bed.

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25th January 1943

"Major Egan, fancy seeing you here." Buck clapped John on the shoulder as he approached the bar, leaning on the sticky surface next to him. He gave John that small, teasing smile, almost resplendent in his blouse- new rank insignia at his shoulders, matching John's own. They had planned to celebrate with a few others in the Officer's club,
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but the plan changed and they went out on the town, now amongst the fast paced dancing and many drunk soldiers.

"Major Cleven, nice to finally see you." John grinned, knocking back the last of his whiskey.

"I was responding to Marge, you know she's keen to fund the entire air force with how many letters she sends. Let her know of the promotion."

"I should write to my mom, probably. She'll want to tell everyone who will listen."

"Of course she will." Gale laughed softly, "Your mom's lovely."

"Yeah, I'll do that tomorrow. Too drunk to write, currently." John gestured to the empty glass in front of him- he had drank three, neat.

"You've only been here an hour?" Gale turned to face him, scanning John as if he could see the amount of alcohol in his blood, assessing how steadily he was standing. The song changed, Glen Miller, a few more couples joined the dancing.

"Not that drunk, I can function." John scanned the room, making eye contact with a brunette standing by the wall- he grinned at her.

"See, that's the problem, you can function whilst you've had double the safe amount."

"See, I thought that was a talent." John turned to face him as if to prove he could stand, grinning at the dissaproving look on Buck's face, "Y' wanna dance, Buck?"

"No, John, I'll see you tomorrow."

John was surprised to find out that the lovely young lady he was currently kissing didn't mind being pressed against a wall outside a bar to be fucked. In fact, he was surprised she wanted to go that far anyway.

She had danced well, keeping pace with him even when someone changed the record playing to an faster paced song. John had watched Buck leave, saying goodnight to a few men on the way and clapping Curt on the shoulder, the silhouette of him walking away making John want to hold his waist. Instead, he put his hands on this lovely woman, turning the charm on whilst flirting and seeing where it leads.

Her name was Irene and she said she was here to dance before the airmen left for overseas, but she was certainly willing to do more from the way she tugged him to this alley.

Her lipstick was smudged all over him, it felt strange and tasted stranger- like how he imagined the taste of wallpaper paste. She pressed up into him with an inconsistent roll of her hips, hands scrabbling over his shoulders and neck.
Her hands were soft, an almost surprising lack of callouses, so different than what he wanted.
John worked on unbuttoning the her blouse, swiftly untucking it from her skirt and working on the hooks on her brasserie. Irene yanked down her underwear and let it fall past her heels, going for John's belt, undoing it right as he got his hands under her bra. She was soft in his hands, the opposite of Buck, taking him into her palm. John closed his eyes and imagined she was taller, muscles firmer and shoulders broader, stiff and hot between him and the wall.

John stared at himself in the mirror, pressing a few fingers into his eyes to temporarily relieve the pain starting to bloom, quietly groaning at the sight that greeted him when he opened his eyes again. He had fallen asleep immediately upon returning to his bed and now stood infront of the line of sinks, freshly showered and exhausted. It probably wasn't smart of him to have used a pro-kit in the latrine but it was better than the alternative, now trying to remember if he had done everything he should before going to bed. Again.

"Thought I saw you come in here." Curt appeared in the doorway, jacket thrown over his undershirt and boots unlaced, "You're practically asleep on your feet, Bucky, go to bed."

"I was going to."

"Then why are you here? Done ya kit?"

"Yeah, just to be sure."

"Another dream?" Curt asked as he stepped towards John, putting one hand on his elbow, like he wanted to comfort John but knew nothing would help.

"How'd you know?" John asked drily, facing Curt.

"'Cos you look like you haven't slept in six years."

"Feel like it too."

"How was she?"

"Fine." John muttered, closing his eyes against the light. Curt stepped closer to wrap his arms around his waist, John returned the hug, squeezing him lightly.

"I can't tell if your own performance was underwhelming, or if she simply wasn't the person you really wanted."

"I think you already know."

"I do." Curt sighed, leaning his head into John's chest. John squeezed him again, enjoying the warmth of him whilst he still could.

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10th April 1943

John partially regretted taking this seven day leave.

He had suffered through the twenty-four hours on the train from Kearny to Manitowoc, got drenched in the rain once the cab dropped him off a half mile from his house, then got lectured by his mother.

"You're sopping, Johnny! You should have had an umbrella with you." Marie Egan said after he stepped into the kitchen, worn leather jacket dripping onto the tiles.

Johnny. His mother was the only one to still call him that. *Her little boy*.

She peeled it off him and was about to start tutting at the state of him, a little puddle growing on the floor. He was glad he left his sheepskin at his bunk, it would have taken forever to dry.

"Oh yeah, the air force mandated umbrellas." John muttered, placing his hands over hers and gently as he could removing them, "Mom, I can do this, stop."

"I half expected you in that fancy blouse like when you got your wings. You looked so handsome, love."

"Thanks, Mom." John ran a hand through his wet hair, turning to go to his bedroom before Marie could suggest he sit in front of the hearth with all the blankets in the house around his shoulders. He didn't
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point out that he would have to wear said blouse if he left the house during leave, polished buttons and shoes, perfectly ironed as required.

The first time he saw his sisters in maybe two and a half years was at dinner that night, Anne opposite him and Ruth next to her, just as it had been for his whole life. John could feel the tension from his father, the man was stubbornly not looking at his son as if to drive his disapointment deeper. Leroy Egan had lost his father to the Philippine-American war and his brother to the Russian revolution and when he joined the Air Force had nearly hit John he was so angry. He had dissaproved strongly ever since, refusing to read any letter John sent to him and shutting down any conversation that might lead to discussion of John's joining the military,

Ruth was just as primped and put together as before, dark hair in tight curls around her shoulders, spine as straight as if she were marching on the parade grounds.

Anne was still maddeningly sweet and lovely, chatting with Marie about her church friends, light lipstick and an engagement ring on her finger. *Since when was she engaged? Wasn't she still ten? Just as he was still fifteen?*

John had grinned widely and congratulated her when she said she was getting married in two months, the same when Ruth said she got a job as a secretary in a major lawyer firm in the city. He told them he was being shipped overseas soon, possibly within a few months- they were progressing in life, he was being sent to his death.

Leroy occasionally added something to one of his daughter's stories, pointedly didn't ask John anything, listened attentively to Marie's updates about the next church event. He told them about the farm when asked, the place John had worked before enlisting- the corn was growing well so far and the cows and goats in the neighbouring farm were finally getting along. John found himself smiling lightly throughout the dinner, it was nice to eat familiar food and listen to his family talk. But still, he found himself missing Buck.

John woke up after midnight that night, in his childhood bed, blearily rubbing a hand over his face. *Fuck*- that dream. Buck in the left seat of a B-17, attention purely on the instruments. Gale hadn't put on his gloves yet, those skilled hands keeping steady on the throttle levers and control wheel. The same hands that would hold a hunting rifle steady, a good shot with his .45 during training, careful movements of those deft fingers handling any weapon.

He kept his left wing close to the lead's waist, carefully practiced and controlled. Control. One thing Gale had a tight grip on, the opposite to John. The dream hadn't been as horny as previous ones, but he found himself flushed and sweaty anyway.

"John, how nice to see you, boy."

As they left the church, Bucky moved his cap from where it was tucked under his arm to shake the priest's hand, switching the charm on with a smile.

"Father, lovely sermon." John said, a half lie. He didn't really believe in God anymore, after seeing the BBC newsreels, growing up during that economic train crash, his unexplainable attraction in a place where it is illegal.

"Thank you. Your mother told me you were a major now, may God be with you when you fly, son."

John just nodded in acknowledgment and moved on to let his mother chat with the priest, not having to wait long before she took his arm- like she wanted to show him off to her peers, the perfect son she deserved. The perfect son he was not. He wondered if she would do this again when he returned, tell stories of heroism and bravery outside the church, pride and patriotism.

John ended up thinking of Buck, who was also on leave at the same time, hopefully walking arm in arm with wonderful Marge, doing something obnoxiously sweet for her like planning a picnic. They were perfect for each other as far as John knew, every time she visited him, or he took leave and visited her, Buck got that stupid loving look in his eyes. He looked at her like she was the most beautiful woman in America, like she had his heart tenderly cupped in her delicate hands- John didn't know why it bothered him so much.

That night, John sat on the back porch with a glass of whiskey and a cigarette, enjoying a few moments alone after having to get be on an overnight train and previously surrounded by other men. He had relished being in his own bedroom, will love the familiar bed, alone. It wouldn't be strange to go back, he missed the camaradarie with the other guys, to know there's always someone in the room you could talk to, but he would miss having his own space. Ultimately, he wanted to speak to Buck again.

"Don't let mom catch you with that."

John turned enough to see Anne closing the porch door behind her, low heels clacking on the wood as she approached him, sitting on the step next to him. John took a drag and exhaled through his nose, watching the smoke dissipate in front of him.

"She knows I'm a lost cause at this point."

"Lost cause indeed," Anne laughed, reaching to take John's glass from his hand, "This is way more than three ounces, you can't drink that much, let me help with it."

"No, no, trust me I'm fine." John tried to grab it back but she downed half of the glass before he could, calmly handing it back, "Madwoman."

"I can't let you have all the fun, besides, you've been letting me drink your alcohol since I was seventeen."

"If I could go back in time..."

"Shut up!" Anne shoved him but he barely moved, "I mean, love you dear brother. Thank you for the whiskey."

"You're so welcome." John muttered, giving her the least amused look he could, "Tell me about your fiancé."

"James is so lovely. He works down at the harbour and took on extra shifts to put towards the ring and he taught me so much about how steam ships work. I genuinely love spending time with him, I keep thinking about him when he isn't around, I know he'd do anything for me." Anne grinned widely as she spoke, it reminded John of himself talking about Buck, "I'm helping him get better at reading, we go down to the shore to do it when it's nice weather"

"You're so whipped."

"Just because I'm in love and you're not!"

John bit back his instinctual reaction and just hummed lightly. He took another drag to shut himself up.

"You're not telling me something- spill, do you have a girl in Nebraska?"

"No, there's no one." John tried his best to keep his response neutral, he couldn't afford to give anything away.

"There so is! Is she married, is that it?"

"There ain't anyone, alright, leave it."

"Alright, since dad won't let you talk about the air force inside, tell me now."

"If you really want to know, it's alot of military shit and aviation."

"Well then tell me about the stuff that isn't."

"There's alot of good guys, I've made more friends recently than my whole school life, even if alot of them are my subordiantes. They can be so much fun, when we're allowed to have fun. Some of the guys adopted a duck a few months back."

That was the right thing to say, Anne's face lit up with a smile, soon she was asking questions about the guys. John answered them to the best of his ability but without making them all sound like idiots, or like they were badly disciplined- which they were.

"Tell me about this Buck guy."

"I met him in Basic on the first day, I went right up to him and gave him a nickname, he's actually called Gale but everyone calls him Buck now. He doesn't drink or gamble and doesn't like sports or dancing, we have almost nothin' in common, I'm surprised we're friends." John smiled to himself, reigning in the urge to tell her everything, silly stories and anecdotes coming to mind, "He's our finest pilot for sure, he's calm and steady under pressure but won't take any compliments, he says *'I'm here to fight a war, just like the rest of you*"'

"John Egan, best friends with someone well adjusted and composed? Whatever next, maybe he'll subconsciously affect you."

"Nah, don't think so." John shook his head lightly, stubbing his cigarette out and leaving it in the ashtray.

"Of course not" Anne grinned at him, of anyone, she was the least likely to want him to change. John grinned back.

John finished the whiskey and stood, leaning on Anne's shoulder a bit just to annoy her, giving her one last smile before he went back inside.

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12th May 1943
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"Was she not to your taste, John?"

John startled at Marge's voice, looking up from his shoes to see her approaching from the back door of the bar, edges of her hair lit orange in the street lamps like a halo, completely out of place in the back alley. The garbage wasn't overflowing but it was easily smelt from most places, it opened out onto the street at one end, the surroundings buildings towering above so it was only lit by artifical light. Men came out here to smoke, fuck or piss up the walls, so it smelt pretty bad- Marge stepped over a suspicious puddle to reach him and he noticed she wore closed toe black heels to contrast her pale silk stockings.

"She's beautiful, just not feelin' it tonight." John replied, speaking around his cigarette just before he inhaled.

"Not feelin' it, huh?" Marge settled next to him with her hands on her hips, pointedly not touching the wall, "From what Gale told me, you're going home with a new broad every night you're allowed out."

"Not *every* night." John muttered, he thought about offering her a cigarette but already knewthe answer, "What's he been sayin' about me? All bad things, I hope."

"Oh, all the bad, that you're a trouble maker, womanizer, a drunkard."

"Sounds about right."

"Don't matter how much of a trouble maker you are so long as you don't bring Gale into it. I don't want him coming back with stories of how you made him do somethin' stupid."

"I ain't gonna do that, Marge. I do stupid shit regularly but no one gotta join me."

"And why exactly aren't you feelin' it, your early start tomorrow or the way Gale's been lookin' at you?"

John tried to reign in the confused look, genuinely not understanding what she meant. He's been told he looks at Buck like he's the prettiest thing in the world, like he hung the moon in the sky just for John, but never the other way around. Marge was partially right, he wasn't going to start flirting with her friend- Evelyn, he thinks- with intention to go home with her because he was leaving the next day.

"Don't give me that look, you'll figure out what I mean eventually."

"Marge, you're overestimating me."

"I certainly am not, John. Look, you listen to me real good." Marge stepped closer, purposely making eye contact with him that felt like she was staring into his soul, so intense he felt a bit intimidated, "Take care of him."

"Well, of course, us Yanks gotta stick together over there."

"John Clarence Egan, *take care of him* or so help me God, I will find you."

"Marjorie Spencer, I will do my best." John, stubbed his cigarette out on the wall and chucked it in a puddle. He moved to the door to open it for her, standing to the side as she passed him, the metal handle was cold in his palm.

"Your best better bring both of you home again."

"Don't count on it."

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25th July 1943

The sun had risen about twenty minutes early that morning.

Or, twenty minutes before John expected, still thinking sunrise would be closer to six am than five at this time of summer.
By the time they had woken, dressed, eaten and been briefed, the sun was low in the east at six thirty. It was relatively clear over the air base, but it was likely to be different over the continent. England's consistent overcast meant there were alot of sunrises smothered by cloud, often it would be raining when they took off too, dangerously low visibility on many mission days.

John was sat opposite Blakeley in the truck, watching a crow bother a buzzard just a few hundred yards above them. Buck was in the truck in front with his own crew, leaning on the back of the seat. It was barely fifteen degrees celsius yet but John was already sweating in his sheepskin.

"You alright?" Blakeley asked nodding to John's hands where he had them draped over his knees, trembling.
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"Yeah." John tucked his shaking hands into his jacket pockets, "Don't go worryin' 'bout me."

"You're my co-pilot today, 'course I'm worrying. You need to keep it together."

"I'm fine, trust me."

"If you say so, Major."

"You gonna come have some food?"

John looked up from the sinks to find Buck hovering outside the door- equally as tired and sweaty as John felt.

"Yeah, gimme a minute." John replied, re-wetting the rag in his hand. He had ended up with a few minor scratches on his face from flak and after hours, the dried blood was being stubborn.

The interrogation was the same as usual- *'couldn't see a thing at the IP so we went to the back up target.' 'The cloud was so thick I could barely see the lead plane.' 'Kiel must'a had so many fuckin' AA batteries, it was like a solid wall of flak.'*

John had sat with his whiskey spiked coffee and listened to the questions being answered, rarely adding anything. After interrogation, they would clean up a bit or go to the infirmary, eat then go to bed.

"Lemme help you." Gale offered, stepping into the room to take the cloth.

"I think I can handle washing my own face, Buck."

"I know."

John could have grabbed the rag back ane told Gale to fuck off but he just stood still instead. Buck was as gentle as he could be whilst still scrubbing enough to remove the blood, fingers moving over John's cheek first. The blood had dripped from just under his eye to below the mask, slowly coming off with each swipe. Before Gale moved on to the next streak of blood, he placed a hand on John's chin, fingers griping one side of his jaw to keep him still, moving to swipe over where blood had nearly dripped into his eye.

"Think these will heal fine." Gale murmured, so close and concentrated, John watched the tiny movements of his eyes focusing.

He glanced at Gale's lips, trying not to get distracted.

"I've had worse."

"You've had worse not even in a plane, you're reckless and accident prone."

"I wouldn't say that-"

"You wouldn't 'cause you don't watch yourself act like a mad man every night."

John grumbled to himself quietly, allowing Buck to turn his head for better access to where he had smeared blood in his hairline to prevent it going in his eye.

"You remember that night you crashed your bike? That was worse than this." Gale said with a smile, briefly meeting John's eyes.

"Yes, I remember."

He remembered drinking in Diss on a rainy night, taking the hedge-lined country roads back to Thorpe Abbotts, trying to brake by pedalling backwards when a pheasant wandered in front of him and ending up on the ground. He had scraped his knee and shoulder a bit- even through his uniform- and came back to the barracks sopping wet, covered in mud and blood. Gale had told Curt who then told everyone else and by the next evening John was thoroughly made fun of for it.

"You're all good" Gale said as he let go of John's face.

"Thanks." John accepted the rag back with a smile, rinsing the blood out before wringing it out and stuffing it in his pocket. When he turned back, Gale hadn't moved, watching him with a strange expression, it reminded John of how he looks at Marge.

John gave him a grin, just about to clap him on the shoulder and leave when Gale surged forward, kissing him with a pressure he never would have expected. John placed a hand on Buck's hip, shock, elation and something like guilt twisting in equal parts in his chest, kissing back and leaning into Buck's warmth.

A distant shout made them pull apart suddenly and John opened his eyes in time to see Gale's expression change from regret to completely blank, startlyingly empty after such a spike of emotion on John's part. Gale's remorse bled into John, washing away any happiness he had

felt before, carefully matching his expression to Buck's.

"That never happened." Gale muttered, about to turn to leave and giving John one last look, scarily unreadable once again.

"What happened?" John replied, feigning confusion just to make sure Buck knew he was on the same page, but not because he wanted to be. They both left the room with a lot more distance between them than normal.

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25th August 1943

After the Officer's club closed, John found himself with his flask in the woods, definitely too drunk to be drinking any more. He carried on, some logical part of him telling him to go to bed- it sounded suspiciously like Buck- but he ignored it, stumbling over a tree root and almost falling.

He had only just got back from Africa that day- the day before he realised belatedly, it was past midnight- since Crankshaft's bird was too badly damaged to fly back, they were put on a ship in Portugal. There wasn't much to drink on the ship so now he was drinking enough to cover the few days he was sober, past the point of being fun to hang around and now just a danger to himself.

He tried to ignore why he was drinking so heavily in the first place, but kept finding himself failing, thoughts moving to his last mission.

What a fucking mess.

Nine planes gone- ninety men dead, interned in Switzerland or POWs, good, honourable men. *Curt was gone.*

In between the memories- the chaos and fear of battle- John felt empty, numb. He hasn't seen Curt go down, the oxygen fire before he left formation, wasn't sure if he was glad or not. Despite not knowing what happened to Curt, he was still terrorised by it, imagined images of those burning oxygen tanks exploding. The confirmation his friend was dead would be somewhat a relief, but he would see that fatal explosion in his dreams until he died.

He knew that to be true because he already had nightmares, terrifying and gory, making him wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes it was himself, or a friend, or Buck- sliced by flak, exploded by a shell,
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a direct bullet to something vital, the plane going down whilst trapped in it.

He could imagine Curt's mother receiving that Western Union telegram that said her son was missing in action- would she assume the worst or hold on to hope? The only man who knew about John's feelings for Gale, who knew of his dreams, who he had felt against his own skin and truly cared for. John's eyes suddenly stung and he drank deeply to pretend he wasn't about to cry. Would Curt want him to feel like this? Probably not- he'd tell John to quit being so pathetic and go to bed. At the thought, another bout of grief hit him, just wishing Curt would arrive from Spain and ask for a double double at the officer's club, appear out of the dark to steal his liquor- no, he was gone and it was past midnight.

John fought to keep his breathing steady but soon lost, he was too drunk to control his emotions and soon found himself hunching over his knees, sobbing. He would never again see Curt's stupid grin or argue about baseball or drink with him at night. He missed him so badly and it had only been days. He was so young, just a kid in the grand scheme of things, full of fear in the end. They all were.

"Thought I'd find you here, John." John looked up and hurriedly wiped his cheeks, seeing Gale standing a few feet away with a flashlight.

"Oh, y'know, just out here stargazing."

"We both know that is a blatant lie, you don't give a shit about stars." Gale said he approached John, crouching near him, "Lets get you to bed."

"I care when it's you telling me about them." John stood with a groan, leaning on Gale.

John tried to remember anything Gale had told him, constellation names, individual stars, anything, but came up blank. All he could remember was Buck's soft expression in the dark, his little grin talking about the stories behind the constellation names. *'That one is Cygnus, the swan. Story goes that son of the sun god rode his chariot but couldn't control it, so Zues struck him down and he fell into a river. His lover Cygnus spent days retrieving his remains to bury him, and the gods were enamoured by his devotion, so turned him into a swan and put him in the stars.'*

"Well, aren't you sweet." Gale said, moving quick as an asp to take

John's flask and pour the rest of the whiskey on the floor.

"Hey, I paid for that!" John tried to snatch it back but was too slow, Gale just further extended his arm away from him.

"Drinking will not solve anything, especially not this."

"I'm not trying to solve anything, I'm trying to get through this war without going mad. You wouldn't understand, Mr doesn't drink, doesn't fuck, doesn't bet."

"Who said anything about-" Gale cut himself off, starting to lead John out of the woods with a hand on his waist, warm even through the layers of clothes.

"About fucking? It's just that Marge seems like the type to wait until marriage."

"You're calling me a virgin?"

"Yeah, guess I am? Got a fun story to prove me wrong."

"None that I'm telling *you*." Gale sighed, frustrated. John figured if he was having to deal with himself, he'd had left him in some ditch by now, regardless of how much mud or stagnant water it had.

"Not *me*? Afraid I'll make fun of you for finishing in two minutes? Promise I won't, darling."

"John, please shut up."

"I don't want to go to bed."

"Please, John. You're acting like a child."

"Children don't drink that much whiskey, I hope."

Gale stepped back with a hand on a hip, sighing in exasperation. John was firmly sat on the foot of his cot, refusing to let Gale undress him, or to get under the blankets still dressed. He didn't want to go to bed and be left alone, once again stuck with his thoughts despite being in a room full of men. Gale stepped forward, even closer to John's knees, frustrated with his provaracating.

"Get into bed and settle down, or I'll be forced to do it myself."

"What are you gonna do, strip me?"

Gale just glared at him, cogs turning in his head like he was trying to figure out why John was doing this. He seemed to come to a conclusion and simply turned away, walking around the cot next to John's to go to his own.

John looked at his own lap sulkily, slightly upset his half-thought plan was so easily foiled. Less of a plan and more desperation. He had only just shrugged off his jacket when Gale looked over in the dark, dressed in his sleep clothes and face blank.

"What?" John whispered, exaggeratedly leaning forward. It worked, Gale striding back over to him in seconds, retrieving John's jacket and folding it neatly.

"Everyone misses Curt, it's okay to be upset."

"This is war. I need to get used to it."

Gale sighed again, kneeling down next to the cot and starting to unlace John's boots. He made no effort to help Gale, even when he started tugging then off, soon starting on John's shirt instead. When it was suitably unbuttoned he rose to yank it off his arms, having to work harder since John wasn't being co-operative at all.

"Work with me here, Egan."

John ignored him, just watching as Gale found the empty coat hangers and put both the shirt and jacket on the rail above his bed.

"You're drunk and upset, I know, but do you have to be quite so difficult." Gale sighed, moving back to John to see him sprawled width ways on the cot, legs bent at a strange angle.

"You know I do, baby."

Gale made quick work of his trousers- John honestly thought he'd leave it there and was subsequently surprised by the fingers at his belt, lifted his hips enough for Gale to tug them down and off. John watched him carefully, afraid he had made him uncomfortable by being so stubborn, but there was none of that in Gale's expression, no tense muscles or quick movements.

"It's late, you're going to go to bed now and stay there whether you sleep or not."

"Yes Major."

Gale turned away from the rail to move back to John, leaning closer to sweep a hand through his hair, tender in a way John hasn't seen from him. The proximity, the warmth of him so close to John's skin, eyes soft- it all made John wish to kiss him, a heat settling in his stomach with the urge to pull him down and ask him to pin him. He wanted Gale to lean his weight on John's hips and wrists, to grind or stroke or *something*.

Gale's gaze flicked down to John's lips briefly before he suddenly pulled away, going to his own bed and not looking back. John missed the warmth, his hand in his hair, sitting up to get into his own bed as told.

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23rd September 1943

When Gale left interrogation, John had to put his hands in his pockets to not grab the man by his face and kiss him then and there. From what he overheard, it was a milk run, no aircraft lost but some damaged and minor injuries only. They'd have to wait until the bombing result photographs came in to have an official answer but it seemed like it was a good result, the target was an airfield in Brittany, there were enemy fighter attacks but minimal flak.

John followed Buck to the barracks, something like static in his head as he rambled about anything that came to mind. Buck didn't seem to mind that he was following him like a lost puppy, or the incessant talking, he just listened and replied accordingly. John always felt so useless on days the 418th were stood down, his crews needed a rest but he wanted to be up there with them, with Gale.

Buck sat down on the grass next to him with a lot more grace than John had employed, folding his legs underneath him carefully as John started picking at the grass.

"Come here often?" John grinned when he realised it sounded like he was introducing himself to some dame at a bar.

"Not really, bit of a walk, but it's nice."

They sat underneath a leaning willow, perched on the bank of a small, shallow river that cut through another of Norfolk's flat fields. The area was mostly used for crops but this field was occupied by a herd of beef
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cattle, keeping well away from the pair of them.

"'S very different a view from home."

"I would expect so- no cowboys or crawfish ships around here." John nodded in agreement, he missed many things about home, it was so different after all, but he was beginning to like the country a bit.

Even knowing that the air bases had to be in the middle of nowhere he had expected to meet more British stereotypes of the Cockney working class in dodgy side streets or posh young ladies who belonged in a ballroom dancing to some echoing waltz. He knew those type of people still existed but no one he had met here was like that, getting on like a house on fire with most of them, even alot of the RAF boys from Methwold that they met in Thetford. They barely even reacted when John had made fun of the place names.

One thing he loved was the dancing and music in Diss's town square they had seen at the start of August- a group of people surrounding the two alternating groups of men in white shirts and shorts, bells on their shoes and hats. The band consisted of an ancient looking man playing an accordian, a fiddler and a marching band-like drummer.

Gale huffed a laugh and reached into his interior jacket pocket, retrieving a beige envelope with familiar handwriting. The top right corner had a red air mail stamp, the confirmation stamp from processing was dated two weeks ago- a little bit of home, six cents spent to ship Marge's words across an ocean. John wasn't sure which of the happy couple he envied more.

"Think you outta read this."

"What does lovely Marge have to say to me?" John said as he took it, first noticing the sweet smell of her perfume clinging to the papers. Marge's handwriting neat but elegant, words chosen carefully; he could imagine her drafting it in pencil before copying it to this page.

'Dear Gale, as I write I have just met with Mary'- John skimmed most of the words until he found his own name, he didn't know who Mary was or why it was significant that they went to a dance hall. *'How is John? I hope he is well, maybe you can convince him to write to me, especially as his sisters are not allowed to send him letters. Tell him that I want to remind him of what I told him before he left and let it be a reminder for you too, Gale, I wish the best for both of you. The stray cat across the road finally gave birth'*- John handed the letter back and Buck tucked it back in the envelope and then back in his pocket- he remembered what she

told him.

"Do you remember what she means?" Gale asked.

"Sure, you tell me first though." John replied, tilting his head as he met Gale's eyes.

"Is this you being stubborn or not remembering?"

"Just lookin' out for my own self interests, Buck, not gonna tell you all my secrets if I ain't even sure that's what she means."

"Fine." Gale sighed, looking away from John to rub at his forehead, closing his eyes with a long-suffering sigh, "Marge and I, uh, have an agreement goin' on."

"You agreed to take in that stray cat and her kittens?"

"What? No." Gale looked up at him equal parts shocked and incredulous.

"Look, I know it's hard to talk about this shit but you gotta spit it out."

"She's got a girl at home and suggeted I do the same here."

"I'm the girl in question?"

"Yeah. Her words."

John looked at Gale, trying to guess what he thought of it, pushing down his own emotions for the time being. He couldn't afford to be impulsive about this. Gale was making intense eye contact with the river, muscles in his jaw flickering as he seemed to be trying to weather the silence. If John went with what he so desperately wanted, they would be risking everything, and more importantly- would they still be friends? John wouldn't be able to live with himself if his own actions cost him such a good friend, a man like Gale couldn't be found just anywhere.

"Marge told me to take care of you, but she gave me a *look* as she said it, like she was speakin' in code." John shook his head affectionately, "Problem is I don't know the code."

"She was tryin' to be careful, you were outside a bar."

"Careful, yes, but I think she assumed I'm smarter than I am."

"John." Buck sighed, a light reprimand, as if that one word was trying to remind him that he had graduated advanced flying school without much issue. John shook his head lightly, giving Buck a smile as if to say he knew what he meant.

Buck leant towards him, fingers hooking into John's collar, eyes just as soft and reverent as when he pointed out constellations. John initiated the kiss this time, trying to get closer to Gale, trying to get closer to he could make a home for himself in his chest, protected under his ribs and lulled to sleep by his heartbeat.

When they pulled apart, Buck repositioned his hand to rest on John's thigh, matching his smile.

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9th October 1943

John had almost considered pouring a splash of whiskey from his flask out the window of the bird he now sat in, but he didn't have alot and it reminded him of Curt. An early morning spent on the wing of a plane, Curt's eyes almost grey in the weak light, uncharacteristicly quiet for once. Bucky had been doing the talking for both of them that night, drunk and impulsive, a memory edged with pain.

Once again, drinking was not enough to get rid of the encroaching numbness.

Buck was an excellent pilot, but the likelihood of him being dead was quite high. He couldn't help but be pessimistic- he couldn't afford to get his own hopes up- not whilst knowing the odds well.

John kept imagining what might have happened to Buck and feeling both a cold rage and some deep well of sadness- would he be visiting is best friend in a vast, uniform military graveyard in a few years? He kept seeing injuries and gory deaths everytime he closed his eyes, Buck's legs blown off by a shell, his neck sliced by a direct bullet, flak straight to an organ.

He remembered Paulina's words periodically, missing her warmth against him, the company of another human being.
'My heart couldn't take another pilot in the potato field.'
He understood her more than she knew, Curt and now Buck, possibly rotting in occupied land or starving and freezing in a camp. Could *his* heart take this?
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'There is no balance. Just one event after another. The worst come out untouched. The innocent dead. But you know one thing? The closer you are to death, the more alive you feel. Every second is a little death.'

She had been so vulnerable with John, heart on her sleeve and open about her grief, a widower come to dance and drink with a stranger, spend the night in someone's company again. John now felt she was a mirror of him, he was the mourning wife to Buck's courageous pilot, now he was lying in a matching potato field to Pavel.

John hadn't wanted to pack up Gale's footlocker but couldn't stand the idea of anyone else doing it. He almost barked at the orderly who came to do it whilst he sat on the floor. He was a bit drunk, so took extra care moving the framed photo of Marge from Buck's little table to the top of he box, everything as carefully arranged as when it arrived in May: a few books, Marge, his aftershave, a little stack of perfumed letters, shoe polish.

John had found his own lucky deuce in there, presumably Buck had put it there and forgot, or didn't believe it would help. John thought about taking it with him to the mission tomorrow but remembered it was revenge- he'd strike the Germans for shooting down Buck. He didn't need luck, there was three outcomes: he died, he became a prisoner of war or he returned to England to do it again. Maybe putting it back in Buck's possession would give him luck again, would bring him back to John safe and sound. John tucked the bill back into the footlocker and with a goodbye smile to Marge, closed it.

"Evening, Egan." A set of well polished shoes entered John's field of vision, slightly too long green pants.

"Croz, what did Harding want?"

"I've been made Group Navigator."

"Congrats, they must be pretty impressed with you."

"Ah, I guess, don't know why really. Does mean I won't be going home anytime soon." Crosby leaned against the end of the bed opposite John, "You're lead tomorrow, I presume?"

"With Brady in M'lle Zig Zig."

"Good luck, I hope it goes as well as today's did."

"They got good results? That's a surprise."

"If you want I can take that down to the orderly's hut on the way to group ops." Crosby offered, pointing to Buck's locker- a kind offer, but John instantly refused.

"No, he'll return soon, I know it. He's just MIA. He'll want to see Marge and read his...science books when he gets back." John stood and slid the box back under the cot, "If I go down and anyone sends this, I'll find my way out of whatever cesspit or field I'm in to personally berate them."

"You got it, Bucky."

John woke to find Brady sitting at the end of his bed reading his copy of Guys and Dolls. Still in the haze of a nightmare, he frowned at Brady, heart pounding.

Brady already wore his flying clothes, the sheepskin on the bed next to him. John was exceedingly confused why he was in a hut that wasn't his own, sitting on his bed, only a few hours before they were to be roused for the mission.

"The fuck 're you doin' 'ere?" John whispered, watching as he carefully put the book down and turned to him.

"Makin' sure you get up for this mission."

"You couldn't come after the orderly, you decided to loiter in someone else's hut."

"Couldn't sleep."

"Don't tell Doc Stover that, or I'll have to fly the plane alone."

"No, they'd replace me. Besides, he won't ground me for that."

"Better be careful."

"And you, everyone's worried."

"Are they now?"

"The Infamous Buck and Bucky separated by war, everyone knows you come as a pair."

"I'm gonna find him."

"What if he's dead, you'll join him?"

"Nah, he ain't dead. My buddy's just MIA, you'll see."

"Sure." Brady handed Bucky the book to put back in its place on the nightstand, watching as Bucky's hand shook before taking it. John sighed at the way Brady noted the tiny movement so astutely, of he of all the pilots in the hundredth would be looking out for signs of fatigue in his crew, he had a duty to his own men and would do what he thought was best for everyone. He needed a co-pilot that wouldn't crack under pressure, John needed to be that tomorrow- today.

"It's nothin'"

"Maybe neither of us should be flying tomorrow." Brady muttered, picking up John's sheepskin from the floor and carefully folding it, "Still don't know how you got yourself onto the mission anyway, doesn't seem logical to put someone who just lost a good friend into a war machine."

"They need guys to fly, we don't have many."

"You have any of those dreams?"

"I might regret telling you, but yeah. Before I woke up I had one."

"I've had a few, it makes it hard to get back into the seat. But we have a job to do, no matter how hard my hands are shaking."

"Mhm." John murmured, unable to keep eyes open.

"You should go back to sleep, I'll make sure you're up in time."

"Thanks, Johnny."

He thought he saw Brady's expression soften a little at the name, maybe it was what his mother called him, just like John's.

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6th June 1944

"You sure you're alright, Bucky? He pulled that punch but it was still pretty hard." Brady folded his arms after he deemed the bruise blooming on John's face minor enough to be left alone.

"Not the only thing that's hard." John muttered, repressing a grin at
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the wholly unimpressed look Brady gave him. Not only was he definitely fine- steadier on his feet than alot of men in the camp and only dizzy when he turned his head- he had riled Buck up with the hope he would snap, would hit him just like Curt had months ago.

"I know it was a while ago but you had a concussion, it was pretty bad too, you can't go around getting hit willy nilly."

"That *was* a while ago- months, Johnny. I'm fine." John insisted. Brady took a seat at the table, leveling John another look, this one more of '*don't say I didn't tell you so*'.

"You did it on purpose, didn't you?"

"So what if I did."

"Unfair to Buck, I'd say."

John decided to ignore that and tuck it away for later, just more ammo for his guilt, the things that plague him at night. Without alcohol he tended to have thoughts- how rare- bothered by every little thing Buck said or might have said or didn't say.

"You're an annoying little shit sometimes but he can stand that, so maybe you're made for each other after all." Brady folded his arms.

"If you say it then it must be true." John folded his arms to make fun of Brady, titling his head a little, giving him a little teasing smirk.

"Bucky." Brady gave him another unimpressed look, probably trying to get him to be accepting and maybe stop getting himself into trouble through a glare alone.

"Oh, so you *do* know who you're talking to, great."

"Don't pull rank on me, it's in your best interest."

"Many things are in my interest but I still ain't doin' em."

"God I hate this bread." Murphy said across the table from John, chewing miserably on the ration bread provided in the camp, having finished his soup.

"There's a reason they give this shit to us and the guards but not Hitler. He knows what's in these bricks and doesn't want to die." Crank

replied, guesturing with his own slice.

"Tad pessimistic for such a lovely hotel." Hambone said with sarcastic cheer.

"Hm, a hotel where you get shot if you want to check out." DeMarco said drily, "Better than cat soup, I say."

"*Do* you know what's in them?" Murphy said, raising his eyebrows at DeMarco.

"Sawdust." Brady muttered, "One of the brass told me."

"That explains alot, actually." Crank said, shrugging before taking a bite of the bread.

"If that's what they use to bulk up the bread, what's in the soup? It's like the Victorian milk scandal." John muttered, finally having managed to choke down the last of his soup and now somewhat regretting it- but still, food was food in this place.

"Wasn't the main scandal because they put borax in it?" Buck said, smiling slightly at John from across the table, "'Enbalmed milk'"

John couldn't help smiling back. How the hell Buck knew that, he didn't know, but the man *read books* and such so it may have been from one of them. He could teach calculus and know so much stuff and build a goddamn *radio,* and what could John do? Rile up his friend to the point of physically fighting him or remind him of his deadbeat father.

"Now that is the most disgusting thing I've heard of them doing to food. Did the British invent it?" Hambone said.

"Probably." Brady muttered.

"You gon' eat that bread, Bucky?" Murphy asked, pointing to the slice still balanced on John's bowl.

"Yes, although I may regret it when I can't shit for a week." John said, picking up the soggy bread with a sigh.

"Don't think I've ever missed my ma's cooking more than now." Hambone said, "When I get back I'll ask her to make that meatloaf I used to hate, I've never wanted that fuckin' thing until now."

"I'm not sure if I could get my mom to stop making potatoes, she'll lose

half her recipes." Murphy said, "Irish cooking and all."

They went around the table and some volunteered a memory from before the war or a passed down family recipe, wistful and sweet, they were all dreaming of familiar comforts.

"What about you, Bucky?"

"Ah, in autumn Mom used to make this apple pudding with apples that I *totally* didn't steal from down the road. I'd ask for that if I could go home now."

"My grandma made something similar. Buck?" Crank asked.

John looked up at his friend, seeing the well hidden unsurety in his posture. Buck had never directly said anything about his mother but John gathered that she hadn't been in the picture for a while.

"Well, I'll be going back to Marge, so I'll probably ask her to teach me to make one of her family recipes."

John smiled to himself, he could imagine the scene clearly, Marge showing Gale some ancient book with many different handwritings, sharing a meal at the end of it. They would be well suited to domestic life, successful and perfect and the all American family dream.

"An interesting twist, Buck, and why not? You'll be just as good at cooking as any dame, I bet."

"Don't tell my mom or she'll start askin' me to help with dinner." Murphy laughed.

"You're perfectly capable of peeling carrots." Crank replied, slapping Murphy on the shoulder as he stood.

John stared up at the bunk slats above his own, once again unable to stop thinking in the quiet of the barrack. It wasn't silent, never was with so many people in one room, breathing or snoring or whispered conversations. He wished he could go for a walk but the goons released their dogs at night and there was only a few hundred yards of mud to pace around.

How many months in this place, stagnant and tiresome as always, starving and trapped and exhausted. Even after months of getting used to the food he still laid in bed only hours after eating wracked with

hunger pain, constantly thinking of his mother's cooking.
Sleep was rarely longer than a few hours- interrupted by dreams or noises and always waking before eight am before appell. The showers were cold, guarded and didn't last long. One wrong move and he might be shot or bitten by a dog and get limited medical attention.

He felt like a caged dog, pathetic and whining now but likely to bite at the next hand that got close. He couldn't deny that the brief thoughts of dying he had over the years had turned into impulses to resist- don't rile up a guard you'll get shot, don't cause any trouble, eat the food you get. Even if they win the war and get out of here, would it be worth it? It'd be very easy to die here.

John screwed his eyes shut and reminded himself that he was here because of a revenge raid, that he had fallen from a plane, got jumped by civilians and stood for hours in literal shit to find Buck again.
He would only leave Gale if he was asked to.

John's thoughts drifted to the kraut announcement earlier, the radio broadcast that confirmed they had landed in Western Europe- hope that it'll be over soon. But then again, Gale would return to Marge, he'll marry her and never again think of John's hands on his skin. John will return to an empty life of longing and nightmares.

Buck had smiled at him earlier but that didn't mean he forgave him- John would give his life to see that smile again, though that sacrifice didn't mean much to him anymore- he had pissed him off, he had hurt him. John curled into a ball on his side as he remembered Buck's face in he dim light of a bombing as he told him about his father, serious and quiet but still beautiful.

The conversation made alot of small remarks made sense, *'If I had spoken back like that to my father, he might have bet me away'* or *'I started working in the oil fields at sixteen, never got a penny from him.'*
Here John was, hurting Gale but only getting a punch in return. He could have bruised Buck's ribs or worse, and yet the man barely accepted his apology earlier. John shouldn't have provoked him, he should have stayed in bed that morning after appell and left Buck to be productive and useful. He couldn't understand why Gale still tolerated him.

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8th May 1945

After Churchill's announcement, the base felt like a different place.
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Everyone had an air of an air of elation, easy smiles and slaps on shoulders exchanged as John makes his way to the officer's club- Victory in Europe, five long years of warfare and the Krauts had surrendered, that cunt Hitler was dead, but many of the higher ups were to go on trial, still nothing would be enough to repay what was done to millions of people.

Just ouside the door to the building with the club and enlisted men's barracks , Crosby, Rosie and Buck were talking, music spilling out the open doors.

"Boys." John announced himself by placing a hand on Buck's waist, cheerily greeting them.

"Bucky, Buck was just telling us his perspective, care to add anything?" Croz said, guesturing to Buck.

"It was shit."

"Right, yeah."

"Tell us what happened here, what about the landing?" Buck promted, Croz launched into a retelling of what happened after Munster, occasional interjections from Rosie with context. Croz explained how he planned over two hundred missions before the Normandy landings and ended up sleeping through the event, the few missions he did, the shuttle to Russia and his time with his wife.

"You're gonna be a father?" Buck asked, smiling widely.

"Congrats, Croz. I mean it." John said, reaching forward to shake his hand vigorously. Crosby shook back, looking a bit overwhelmed at the intensity of shaking but still excited.

"How about you, Rosie?"

Rosie then explained finishing his tour but deciding to re-up, the day of days, crash landing east of Berlin, his return to England with a harrowing experience at some kind of death camp.

"You madman, Rosie. How many raids you done by now?" Buck asked.

"Fifty two."

John exchanged a look with Buck, something between a grin and remorse- they both wished they could have been flying up there with

him. John clapped Rosie on the shoulder, congratulating him too but for a very different reason to Croz, about to make a baseball reference when Buck interrupted. Crosby would be building a life with his wife and newborn son, Rosie would return to his career as a lawyer, Gale told them about Marge agreeing to marry him. John didn't know what he was going to do. They wished each other luck in the future before Croz and Rosie went inside to dance, John steered Gale towards the airfield.

"Come with me, Buck."

The view of the runways from the control tower was clear, the distant music of the band, cheering and shouts from below. The sky was clear of planes, after five years, no sound of engines high above. John could see Lemmons and Winks on the ground, extra boxes of flares at their feet. Meatball was barking and sprinting about between DeMarco and those two kids that hung around the ground crew, playfully tossing his ball for him to catch. Instead of AA fire, the sky was lit by flares- every colour they had, red-red, green-green, yellow-yellow- arcing over planes and landing in the grass.

"What you goin' to do after this, John?"

"Don't know. Go home." John sighed, when he looked at Gale, his face was briefly lit by a flare, eyes tired. Years in training and active combat, they were both finally allowed to show how exhausted they were, finally so close to proper rest.

"I'll see you, though. You better not dissapear on me."

"I won't." John rubbed a hand down his face, "Can't get rid of me that easily."

"You'll be my best man, John, and we'll see what happens from there." Buck said, John wanted to be closer to him, he wanted to kiss him. He took a swig from his flask, burn of alcohol distracting him. Once again he thought of Marge- she wasn't what he had expected, but still Buck would go home to her, they would work to become that All American family, kids running around in a white picketed yard.

"Good plan." John passed his flask to Gale, expecting him to wave it away but somewhat shocked when he took it. John watched Gale drink from it, tuning out the revelers, he watched him without any pretenses, it may be the last time he could do so.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! You can find my tumblr here if you want, but i mostly reblog silly stuff.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!